

INTRODUCTION

#1 Bichelamar,¹ which is the *lingua franca* of the New Hebrides, emerged during the last century from diverse forms of pidginized English. One was Chinese Pidgin English, a trade jargon based on English words arranged in sentences after the Chinese manner. It was first introduced to the New Hebrides by traders who came for trepang, an edible sea-slug much sought after by Chinese gourmets. Trepang is called in French *bêche-de-mer* or *biche-de-mer*, from the Portuguese *bicho de mar* *sea worm*, and it is believed that the name Bichelamar is a corruption of *biche-de-mer* or *bicho de mar*. This jargon, which depended for its diffusion only on the brief visits of trading ships, played at most a secondary role in the birth of Bichelamar, though it might well have prepared the way for it.

The major influence, however, most probably came from the pidginized forms of English used in Queensland by Europeans to communicate with their labourers, most of whom were recruited in the New Hebrides. For these New Hebrideans would resort to this pidginized English to communicate not only with their employers, but also between themselves, either out of sheer necessity (well over a hundred native languages are still spoken in the New Hebrides nowadays), or out of snobbery, believing as they did that it was the language of the white chiefs, so rich and powerful in their eyes.

#2 Thus at once *lingua franca* and status language, Bichelamar could be expected to spread rapidly in the New Hebrides as New Hebridean recruited workers came back to their homeland at the completion of their contracts.

¹Also known as Bichlamar, *Bêche-la-mer*, *Beach-la-mar*, and Pislama.

Bichelamar has developed (nowadays) into the de facto language of the New Hebrides, to which not only New Hebrideans speaking different languages will resort, but even those speaking a same language. Europeans with a good knowledge of Bichelamar will often favour it over French or English when they do not feel fluent enough in these languages. And in some Chinese shops in Santo, one can make oneself understood only by speaking Bichelamar ... or Cantonese.

#3 Bichelamar is reputedly an easy language, being nothing more than English without a grammar. Indeed? Then reader beware! In Bichelamar snow is not *snow*, but *fog*; ice is *snow*. And if me no more tired does mean *I'm no longer tired*, me tired no more is *I'm just tired*. Without a grammar? This remains to be proven. It is true that words in Bichelamar are invariable (with one exception¹). But so are they too in Chinese, in Vietnamese, and in some African languages. The grammars of such languages regulate word-arrangements, and not the forms of words, which never vary. So does that of Bichelamar.